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The Emerging New Government in Thailand

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Summary

The spontaneous political upheaval of last October spawned a drive to achieve civilian constitutional government in Thailand. A wide range of forces on the Thai political scene helped break the preceding three decades of military rule:

—*Fledgling student activists*, whose stand against the Thanom regime's corruption and its failure to meet the serious domestic problems of the country drew a wave of sympathy from the people and the army.

—A broader force of *intellectuals, bureaucratic elite, journalists, and like-minded individuals* bent on bringing political change to Thailand. This group opposes a strong military role in government and seeks other institutional changes posing a challenge to vested economic and political interests in the country.

—*King Phumiphon*, who has left his traditional position on the periphery of Thai politics and placed his immense personal prestige and the institutional authority of the monarchy behind the development of a constitutional government capable of dealing effectively with Thai domestic problems.

—*The military*, which though not a new force, is playing a new role. The durability of the constitutional experiment depends basically on the army's willingness to remain on the political sidelines. For now, the army, led by Krit Siwara, has acquiesced in the King's political role and in civilian management of the country. The military recognizes the wide desire in Thailand for a more responsive government and knows that a new set of military rulers would face the same difficult domestic problems with which the civilians are now grappling. But unless the civilians can establish a solid government that can make acceptable progress in meeting Thai domestic problems, the military will not remain indefinitely on the sidelines.

The political scene in Thailand is currently focused on the efforts of the interim Sanya government to make a solid start in treating Thailand's ills. The government's performance has been mixed:

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—It has failed to restore law and order completely and has projected a somewhat weak image, partly a reflection of Sanya's own personality. This has caused the conservative military some concern as to its durability.

On the other hand, the political fabric of the country has remained intact in spite of student and labor unrest, and the government has launched a series of tax reforms and economic controls that should help combat the inflation and corruption that is fueling public dissatisfaction.

The government is also well down the road toward promulgating the new constitution. It is trying to produce a document that meets the demands for more responsive government, but stops short of violating the vital interests of conservative elements—businessmen, the army, and the King—which have it in their power to bring the experiment to a close. One key aspect of the new constitution will be the permanent National Assembly. In the past, Thai experiments with parliamentary democracy have quickly foundered on the venality and vested interests of the legislators. There is a fair chance, however, that this parliament will be so balanced between hand-picked supporters of the King, district and provincial officials, and spokesmen for the old regime's special interest groups that it can function effectively.

Current plans call for general elections and a new government by early summer. There are several strong candidates for prime minister, including Sanya, who could help to give needed stature to the new regime. Whoever holds the reins will still face serious problems in maintaining public order and keeping inflation within reasonable bounds. A government unable to make solid headway in social improvements and to move toward a position of greater independence in its foreign policy will soon run afoul of student activists and their mentors within the intellectual and bureaucratic elite. A government unable to contain student-inspired public disorder or one that moves precipitately against vested political and economic interests could push the army's patience to the breaking point.

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In sum, Thailand appears to be in for a considerable period of political disequilibrium. Frequent and direct intervention by the King will probably be required if the civilian government is to keep its feet. The result will bear little

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resemblance to parliamentary democracy as understood in the West. At best, it will be a system heavily weighted in favor of palace direction and with a good deal of behind-the-scene military influence. This alone would be a significant movement toward a government more responsive to the interests of the people in a part of the world that has experienced a strong trend toward authoritarianism and military participation in government.

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The Present Forces on the Thai Scene

Since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932, Bangkok's periodic experiments in constitutions and democracy have been short-lived, foundering on ineffective civilian leadership and the impatience and ambitions of the army.

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[REDACTED] Under the old style of Thai politics, the initiative for last October's upheaval would have come from the army establishment. The fact that student demonstrations in Bangkok could bring down an entrenched military regime is testimony to the emergence of new political forces and attitudes that make a more democratic system of government a stronger possibility than in the past.

The Students

The most vociferous of the new forces are the students; their impact on future Thai political developments is one of the key uncertainties in the present situation. The sudden collapse of the Thanom regime left the fledgling student movement without an easily identifiable enemy or a clear sense of purpose. The Sanya administration has had considerable success in co-opting the great bulk of the basically conservative student population; the principal national student organization has remained moderate and generally responsive to the wishes of the government and the palace. Nonetheless, the government has not been able to get the genie of student activism totally and safely back into the bottle. The activities of radical splinter groups have kept political tensions high in Bangkok. Other student activists are stumping the countryside "educating" the Thai people on their rights in a democracy. More recently, some student leaders have seized on external issues such as US and Japanese "interference" in Thai affairs as a means of recapturing some of the unity and momentum briefly enjoyed by the movement last October.

On the face of things, the students' well-established potential for effective mass action on the streets of Bangkok should discourage, rather than encourage, overt restoration of military rule. The students obviously consider the use of this potential to keep the army "honest" as their primary mission. The students, however, could end up being hoist with their own petard. The students' success against the Thanom regime has served to legitimize public demonstrations as a means of correcting perceived wrongs. The result, a spontaneous outbreak of demonstrations throughout the country against corruption, inflation, and a host of more minor issues, has rattled a conservative elite unaccustomed to this type of street dialogue. Further

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student activity on the order of the recent anti-US and anti-Japanese demonstrations in Bangkok could lead a nervous government to call on the army to "restore order" or could even precipitate a unilateral move by military elements to reassert political control. Such a development would seriously threaten the nascent political democratization in Thailand and could possibly lead to a new upheaval.

The first signs of a shift in public opinion against the students have already appeared on the editorial pages of the Bangkok press. The journalists, sensing that the students could destroy the reforms they helped initiate, have begun to speak out against student agitation and unruly behavior. Should the students fail to heed these subtle reminders of the limits to their power, they could quickly lose the widespread public support that sustained their movement last year.

Intellectuals and Bureaucracy

The student movement is only the cutting edge of a broader force comprised of intellectuals, members of the bureaucratic elite, journalists and like-minded people bent on bringing political change to Thailand. Much of what the student activists know about political protest they learned from elements of this group—principally young university lecturers who had studied in the West during the height of the student protests there in the late 1960s.

Alienated and stifled by the conservative policies of the Thamom government, this group of young, well-educated civilians has been the prime beneficiary of the changed political scene. Their newly gained influence is already being felt in the Sanya cabinet, the National Assembly, and the committee drafting the constitution. Dr. Puai Ungphakon, a respected economist and long-time critic of former Thai regimes, probably best represents the general viewpoint of this amorphous group. He has recommended, among other things, that the new constitution specify that the prime minister be the "supreme master" of the armed forces and that the defense minister be a civilian. This viewpoint does not make for a smooth working relationship between would-be civilian rulers and the Thai Army. If the intellectuals are not reasonably patient in pushing for change in the face of the conservative interests of the monarchy and the military, the military could quickly move to bring the experiment in civilian rule to an end.

The King

The emergence of the students and intellectuals as operative political forces would not have been possible without the support of King Phumiphon. His intrusion into the political arena is the single most significant

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King Phumiphon

factor in the new Thai political equation. When the student movement began to develop momentum last year, Phumiphon left no doubt as to which side he was on. During the first major student protests in June 1973, the palace set up tents and provided food for the demonstrators. This action endeared the King to the students, in particular and the public in general. In retrospect, it set him on a collision course with the Thanom government. By his key role in arranging the resignation of Thanom and Praphat and by his personal selection of a new prime minister and cabinet, the King put his enormous prestige and popularity on the line in support of civilian government.

This is a new role for Phumiphon personally and for the monarchy, which had been the virtual prisoner of the military since the absolute monarch, King Prachathipok, was overthrown in 1932. It is a role that many of the King's advisers have urged him to abandon in order to preserve the apolitical sanctity of the throne. But it has become apparent that Phumiphon, intent on making civilian government work, has no thought of removing himself from the political arena. Recently the King's public support of Prime Minister Sanya forestalled a confrontation with the National Assembly that threatened to bring down the three-month-old government.

The Army

King Phumiphon's intervention has made possible Thailand's experiment in civilian rule, but the durability of that experiment depends primarily on the army's continued willingness to remain on the political sidelines. The downfall of the Thanom-Praphat government has clearly left the military on the defensive. The Sanya government includes far fewer people with military backgrounds than its predecessor, and except for the defense ministry, all cabinet portfolios are held by civilians. This by no means indicates that the army is abandoning politics. Feeling is widespread within the military establishment that the civilians will falter and the army will be called upon to take over the reins, a conviction strengthened daily by the Sanya government's failure to restore "law and order." While it remains the only force in Thailand capable of seizing power or imposing its will, for the time being the army, under General Krit Siwara, appears more than willing to remain in the background and support the King in his new political role. The King recently

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asked Krit to participate more directly in the political process—and Krit has responded by planning to establish a political party organization—but it is doubtful that Krit will soon become openly involved in politics.

The emerging understanding between the King and Krit is neither abnormal nor particularly unstable. Both have more to gain than to lose by staying in step. Krit recognizes the popular desire for an effort at civilian rule and appears genuinely committed to giving the new government a fair and full chance to succeed. But in any case he cannot afford to be seen to move against civilian rule prematurely, or to be viewed as opposing the desires of an immensely popular king. As long as he remains the chief military supporter of the King, Krit also preserves his own stature. Not the least consideration, of course, is that any regime instituted by Krit, be it civil or military, would have the same tough domestic problems to face. Krit cannot be very eager to take up such a challenge with his own prestige directly on the line.



General Krit Siwara

Both the monarchy and the military are inherently conservative institutions, and both Phumiphon and Krit hold public order and political stability as a high ideal. Krit knows that the King would acquiesce in—perhaps more likely request—the army's intervention rather than tolerate a high level of public disorder or the adoption of radical government policies running against the grain of the King's and the army's conservative instincts. But as things stand now, any such move is more likely to be taken under the authority of the King and the existing government than by an old-style military take-over.

Although army forbearance is being severely tested by student rebelliousness and disorder, the palace-military understanding appears sufficiently durable to get Thailand and the Sanya government through to the promulgation of a new constitution and national elections—probably sometime in the early summer. The result will not be a full-blown working democracy, but a system weighted heavily in favor of palace direction and a good deal of behind-the-scenes military influence. It would nevertheless represent a notable achievement in a part of the world where the unmistakable trend has been toward greater authoritarianism and military participation in government.



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The Sanya Government

The Sanya Thammassak government's record of concrete accomplishments is not very impressive—especially if measured against the heady reformist expectations in Bangkok of last October. But as a caretaker government designed to serve until a more permanent political solution can be found, it is fulfilling its basic mission. Prime Minister Sanya has maintained his credibility with the Thai public, and his government is still probably the most genuinely popular in modern Thai history. The sum of Sanya's personal credentials—a highly respected Buddhist, academician, and jurist—and a reputation for honesty and integrity mark him in the public's mind as the personal and political antithesis of the rejected Thanom/Praphat regime. To many Thai, Sanya represents a long-needed breath of fresh air.



Premier Sanya Thammassak

The failure to restore law and order fully has so far been the most significant shortcoming of the government. The weak image the government has projected, much to the dismay of the military, has been primarily a reflection of Sanya's own personality. Perhaps in keeping with his strong Buddhist orientation, he backs away from confrontation and the pressures and decision-making that go with the job of prime minister. But the fact remains that Sanya has kept the Thai political fabric intact in the face of a level of student and labor unrest unknown in Thailand's recent history. While riding out the storm, Sanya has initiated an unprecedented series of bi-weekly national television programs in which he and his ministers discuss their policies.

Sanya's popularity and the positive effects of his policies could be offset by two overriding economic problems not of his own making—the oil crisis and inflation. To cope with the oil crisis, he has obtained wider reaching powers, including authority to institute rationing, raise the price of fuel oils, and limit the hours of private business. To forestall a major disruption of the economy, the government worked diligently behind the scenes during the recent spate of strikes to persuade both sides to settle for terms that would not be significantly inflationary. If Sanya can keep rice prices down—and this year's good harvest suggests he can—he should be in a strong position to keep domestic inflation within politically acceptable bounds. A significant deterioration in the supply of oil could, of course, upset this judgment.

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On the domestic front, Sanya has in his own quiet way accomplished about as much as could be reasonably expected in his first 90 days. For example, under the direction of Finance Minister Bunma Wongsawan, the government has launched two tax reforms which, if implemented, will shift the burden of taxation to those most able to pay and will increase government revenues. Among several other less dramatic actions has been the freeing of parts of the trade sector of the economy, particularly rice, from government controls and the ending of protection for Thailand's grossly inefficient domestic fertilizer industry—moves that over the long term are certain to lead to increased rice production and higher rural income.

The Sanya government's preoccupation with domestic affairs has left it little time to devote to foreign affairs. Moreover, Sanya's lack of expertise and his narrow interpretation of his political mandate rule out any significant foreign policy departures under his administration. As a result, Sanya has done little more than pursue policies begun under the Thanom leadership. The dialogue with Peking has been resumed; steps have been taken to improve relations with Burma; and statements have been made calling for a re-examination of relations with the US.

The New Constitutional Framework

The most pressing and sensitive task for the Sanya government has been the writing of a new constitution. To be viable, the document produced must meet the popular desire for more responsive government, but must stop short of threatening the vital interests of more conservative elements, including the army, which have it in their power to bring an end to the democratic experiment. The new constitution must also provide for more effective political institutions than did the short-lived democratic constitution of 1968. The 1968 venture foundered on the venality and special interests of its parliamentarians, many of whom were essentially tools of the military and most of whom were easily corruptible.

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Under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice, the new constitution is being drafted by a committee of jurists, political scientists, bureaucrats, and army officers. A draft has been submitted to the cabinet, and the final product will eventually go to the National Assembly for approval. The need to balance competing political interests, while correcting the defects of the past, may produce a constitution that is as much "royalist" as "democratic." In its present draft, the new constitution reportedly will call for a parliamentary system with a bicameral National Assembly. The lower house will be popularly elected, but the upper house will be elected by the lower house

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from a list of nominees submitted by the King—a process that ensures the palace a significant voice in the new legislature.

The King has already moved to build his influence on the new political process by hand-picking the candidates for the interim National Assembly elected on December 19. This new body is drawn from a broad cross-section of Thai society—from civil servants to farmers. Most of its members have never before held public office; about the only thing the new legislators have in common is an indebtedness to the King. Although the new body shifts the focus of representation away from the military to a broader constituency, most members appear to be receptive to direction from the palace. The interim assembly will be dismissed when the new constitution is promulgated. Nonetheless, the future of the 299 “King’s men” seems reasonably bright. Those who choose to run in the general election will have a head start on the field, and a good many of the others may be appointed to the upper house.

Despite the King’s intervention to influence the makeup of the new legislature, there is considerable doubt in Bangkok that the coming elections will produce a body substantially more responsible than the disastrous 1969 assembly. Nevertheless, probably in a move to improve matters, the constitution as now drafted will require all candidates for the National Assembly to belong to a political party. In 1969 many candidates ran as independents and after the elections aligned with the party most in their political and financial interests. This practice seriously disrupted internal party discipline and clearly contributed to the ineffectiveness of the previous assembly.

Because of the reluctance to make firm political commitments no new parties have yet been organized. General Krit has held some preliminary discussions on the formation of a political party that would represent the military’s viewpoint, but no concrete steps have so far been taken. The only party apparatus still intact from the previous elections is the Democrat Party, which carried the Bangkok area handily in the 1969 election, but failed to maintain its cohesion or to build on its initial popular appeal.

The Next Government

Although a new round of confrontation tactics by students could cause the King to revise the timetable for new elections and to ask the caretaker Sanya government to stay on, current plans call for general elections and the formation of a new government by early summer.

At this point, there is no specific provision in the draft constitution for the selection of a prime minister and his government ministers. It has not been decided whether the next prime minister will be selected from among the elected parliamentarians or will be appointed by the King in response to

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the consensus view of the winning political party or coalition group. The King has expressed enthusiasm in private for two men—Sanya and Khukrit Pramot, an urbane, highly popular and widely read journalist with close ties to the palace.

Khukrit received the highest number of votes in last month's election of the interim National Assembly and appears to be an individual who by political philosophy and image could satisfy both the conservative elite and the young intellectuals.

[it is not at all certain he would relish the rigors of the job.]

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The intellectuals and some of the Bangkok press are backing Dr. Puai Ungphakon for prime minister. Although he had been abroad for two years, Puai ran second to Khukrit in the number of votes received in the interim assembly elections. Puai is currently being wooed by various factions to form a political party. For the moment, however, he appears to be leaning toward the formation of a broad-based non-partisan organization made up of students, trade unions, and other elements that would serve as a check on military influence within government and give him a forum to press his views on economic reform.

Puai's public standing and impressive economic credentials will almost certainly make him a major political force in the months ahead. But it is by no means certain that these assets will propel him into the prime ministership or even into the government. His outspoken proposals for bringing the military under tight civilian control, his links with the former anti-royalist prime minister Pridi Phanomyong during the 1940s, and the support he has received from radical Thai political elements have earned him the distrust of both the King and the army. One possible compromise would be to appoint an individual more acceptable to the King and the military as prime minister, with Puai becoming the deputy prime minister.

If for some reason Khukrit is not given the top post, it is possible that Sanya will be asked to stay on. While he makes no secret of his distaste for the demands of political office, his deference to the King would require him to obey a royal command. A sharp deterioration in public order could force the King to look to the military for the next prime minister. Defense Minister Thawi and Army Chief Krit, both of whom have expressed interest in becoming involved in politics at some future date, would be leading candidates. In an attempt to make such a move tolerable to the public, the officer would probably resign from the army before taking the post.

Domestic Issues

The success of Prime Minister Sanya's successor will rest initially on his ability to maintain public order and keep inflation within politically acceptable bounds. Government economists are particularly concerned that unless

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the inflationary spiral is checked soon, gains from the wage increases recently granted labor will be erased. This could precipitate a new and more costly round of strikes that would be certain to have unsettling effects on the political scene. The two key factors in fighting inflation are the prices of rice and public transportation in the politically powerful Bangkok area.

Over the longer term, the success of civilian government will depend on whether it can reconcile the interests of the new and the old orders. The intellectuals believe that priority should be given to reversing the growing urban-rural disparity in income, education, public health, investment, transportation, and services. They emphasize that although most of the Thai people are farmers and the agricultural sector is the mainstay of the economy, rural areas have received the least developmental assistance. The intellectuals propose that as a first step the Ministry of Agriculture's budget, which today accounts for only eight percent of total budget appropriations, be sharply increased. They also contend that the government could make better use of its disproportionately large reserves by reinvesting at least a third of them in national development--a move that would not step on any politically powerful toes.

The conservative elite--particularly the King and the army--are more concerned with maintaining political stability and internal security than with agriculture. The new government will have to have a much tighter rein on student activists than does the Sanya government. This task may not be as difficult six months from now as it is today since large-scale student demonstrations are losing favor with the public. The King's fears of Communist infiltration of the student movement will be played upon by the military to press for a tough approach to public dissent and disorder. If the government cannot or will not clamp down on student-instigated disorder, it will run the risk of losing the support of the palace and the acceptance of the army.

It remains to be seen whether the Communist insurgency, for the most part played down by the Thanom regime, will require a major commitment by a new civilian government. The insurgency continues to grow numerically but has not expanded beyond its traditional strongholds. A civilian government will be glad to leave this problem in the laps of the generals. Because of the new and less restrictive Thai political atmosphere, the Communists might attempt to couple their armed campaign in the hinterlands with a major campaign of political subversion in urban areas. The penetration of newly formed political parties, student groups, and labor organizations—if successful—would present a far more immediate threat to political stability and the developing democratic process in Thailand than insurgency in the countryside. Fearful of such activity, the army has begun to investigate student leaders, politicians, and professors suspected of leftist leanings.

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If the conservative elements, the King, the military, and the business establishment come to believe, rightly or wrongly, that the experiment in civilian rule is opening the way to the successful spread of urban Communist subversion, the army could quickly decide to end the civilian experiment and establish a more authoritarian regime.

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The Outlook

Thailand, for centuries a remarkably stable society, is facing an extended period of political disequilibrium. King Phumiphon appears prepared for his crucial role, but whether others can handle the unaccustomed stresses equally well is still in doubt.

A government unable to make solid headway in the area of social improvements and move toward a position of greater independence in its foreign policy will soon run afoul of student activists and their mentors within the intellectual and bureaucratic elite. A government unable to contain student-inspired public disorder or one that moves incautiously against vested political and economic interests could push the army's patience to the breaking point. A new round of ill-advised confrontation politics by students could end the experiment in civilian rule almost before it

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begins. The possibility of some dramatic and upsetting action by disaffected elements of the military will be present. But with the King now playing the role of "national ombudsman and court of last resort," Thai politics has a balancing factor that could allow the civilian government to take root and, in time, become more than a facade.

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